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ABSTRACT

The writing course described in this paper is designed to utilize the existing listening, reading, and speaking skills of educationally disadvantaged students to teach writing skills on the college level. The paper discusses the rationale of the course, describes the content briefly, outlines the language skills employed in a typical week's agenda, and provides four examples of formal and informal means of measuring skill development. A diagram illustrating the progressive difficulty of language skills, a student-rate graph and diagnostic chart, an oral competency evaluation form, and a class book list are included. (MAI)

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LANGUAGE SKILLS APPROACH TO WRITING

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Educationally disadvantaged students are admitted to institutions of higher learning in spite of the overpowering skill deficiencies they experience with standard English, the primary means of communication and interaction within the college classroom. The problem of inadequate skills affects every aspect of their learning experience and, therefore, must be dealt with as the most important consideration of their initial college exposure. Educationally disadvantaged students many times have poorly developed language skills; however, the writing teacher must tap the strengths of their listening, reading and speaking skills in order to accomplish gains in what has proven to be the most difficult language skill for these students to master: the ability to write in standard English. By building writing assignments around their better developed skills, we can offer the students more opportunity for success as well as growth through their writing exercises.

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This paper will put forth the rationale and a description of a writing program which draws upon the students' strengths in listening, reading, and speaking skills as support for their weakest skill of writing. Objectives and methods of implementation will

also be discussed.

RATIONALE AND COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course is designed to accommodate a maximum of ten students, in order to insure that individualized attention will be available when students demonstrate such a need. Ideally, there are twenty class sessions of at least two hours duration, resulting in forty hours of class time. During each class period assignments geared to the individual skills are completed, always with the end of improved writing in mind.

In this class, as in most classes, two types of learning take place: passive learning, which is the ability to recognize or understand concepts, and active learning, which is the ability to generate ideas in one's own vocabulary and organizational style. Listening and reading skills can be accessed as passive learning and speaking and writing as active learning. The quality of listening and reading behavior is not readily observable (diagnostic reading tests give quantitative information), whereas speaking and writing performance provide the instructor undeniable proof of the student's understanding and quality of interaction with the material. The active learning situation of speaking and writing gives the student an opportunity to actively generate both concepts and acceptable language by which to convey his ideas. In an attempt to make certain that students are not being passive in the learning situation, there are opportunities for them to demonstrate their active learning participation by means of frequent comprehension checks. Such

passive learning situations as listening to a lecture or reading a short selection can be made active with an informal evaluation directly following the activity. This allows the student to demonstrate an awareness of and an involvement with the material.

As stated earlier, for the majority of educationally disadvantaged students who have participated in this course, the passive learning skills of listening and reading were stronger than the active learning skills of speaking and writing. Furthermore, listening comprehension was greater than reading comprehension in that students could listen to and understand material they could not read with understanding. It was also apparent that students could read with understanding ideas or concepts which they could not have generated with their own vocabularies. However, these students could present ideas more clearly in discussion groups or speaking on tape than they could demonstrate in written exercises. Thus, it is clear that a hierarchy of skills has to be recognized and purposefully dealt with.

(See Figure 1)

Written communication, the most advanced language skill of the hierarchy, demands the precise application of all other language skills. The student must generate ideas and present these ideas in a logical and organized manner; furthermore, he must not only recognize acceptable English vocabulary but must have a command of the language structure and with this language create meaningful sentences. Due to the formal nature of written communication, flaws that are overlooked in oral communication pose a barrier between writer and reader. Therefore, logical organization of ideas, correct sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary must be

mastered before written communication can be most effective.

The realization that students could build on less difficult skills in order to develop more competence with the task of writing prompted the decision to design a course which allowed for practice with listening, reading, and speaking as a gradual preparation for the writing experience. Each class period opens with a short session devoted to listening, followed by reading, then an oral exercise, and finally the writing assignment.

As the in-class assignments progressed, the students become responsible for more difficult learning functions. Confidence and motivation to complete the progressively more difficult assignments are supplied by the previously successful experiences. Maintenance of rate and comprehension graphs by the individual students provides a constant reminder of past success and the promise of continued success as a reward for effort and diligence. These charts are stapled inside the student's folder and stored in the classroom. (See Figures 2 and 3)

The work for each week is developed around a particular writing style such as description, cause and effect, narrative, etc. and incorporates all of the language skills in an attempt to improve not only those skills but also to prepare the student more fully for the writing experience.

LANGUAGE SKILLS EMPLOYED IN A TYPICAL WEEK'S AGENDA

Topic of the week: Description

Listening skills

Instructor lectures on when and how to use descriptive techniques. Student listen and take notes.

Reading skills

Students read short descriptive works from Six-Way Paragraphs or Reading Drills.

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Verbal skills

Students discuss in groups or on tape an aspect of descriptive writing.

Writing skills

Students write original descriptive work in class and a longer more polished descriptive work at home. Re-writing of both short and long papers will be stressed as the primary vehicles leading to improved writing.

Opportunities for success:

1. A short quiz on the lecture material immediately following the lecture. The grade is recorded on chart.
2. Examples of descriptive style from Six-Way Paragraphs or Reading Drills are followed by comprehension checks. Grades are recorded. (See Figure 2)
3. Oral work either on new vocabulary words to be recorded on tape or group discussion which is observed and graded. (See Figure 3)
4. In-class and at-home writing to demonstrate ability to write in a particular style. Graded papers are returned with criticisms to the student and stored in the file folder.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL MEANS OF MEASURING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

- I. Listening skills will be evaluated by the informal close procedure. After a ten to fifteen minute mini-lecture the students will complete an instructor designed close quiz and these quiz grades will be recorded. The use of short lectures followed by a quiz will allow the instructor as well as the student a clear picture of how well the student is listening to and understanding lecture material. Quiz grades will

FORMAL AND INFORMAL MEANS OF MEASURING SKILL DEVELOPMENT (cont'd)

reflect improvement.

- II. Reading skills will be evaluated through pre and post test scores on The Diagnostic Reading Test, Form A and Form C. This standardized testing instrument was chosen due to its ability to reflect growth in reading rate, reading comprehension and vocabulary as well as indicating how the students' performance compares with other college students.
- III. Verbal skills will be measured through comparison of the initial and final taped sample of the student's speech. The comparison will be concerned with clarity of ideas expressed in the verbal context as well as improvement in vocabulary usage, sentence structure, and annunciation.
- IV. Writing skills will be measured through a comparison of the initial and finals in-class writing sample, with organization of ideas, style, grammar/punctuation, vocabulary, and spelling serving as the basis of comparison.

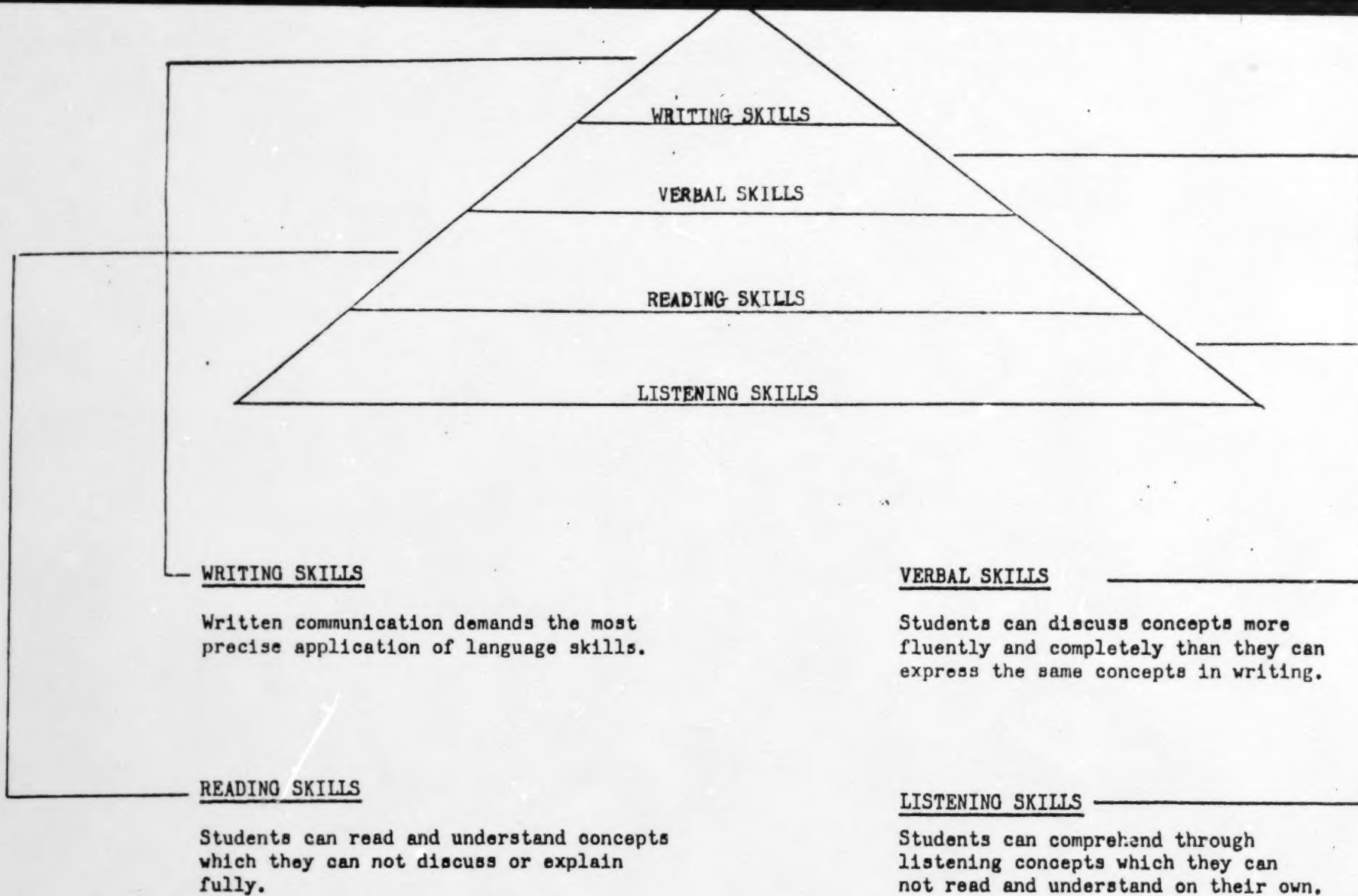
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the greatest advantage of this program over a conventional writing course is that it offers possibilities for success in every class period and thereby motivates these students. Over the past three years, this program has been used with educationally disadvantaged students in classes with enrollments that ranged from as few as three students to the largest enrollment of twelve students.

Whereas the typical college writing course is solely concerned with written work and ignores the students' abilities with other

language skills, this program takes advantage of them. Often eager to fulfill the demands of short exercises concerned with listening, reading, or speaking, these students found themselves gaining confidence they hadn't known with pen in hand. Their papers were markedly improved over the span of the course as were their reading and speaking skills; however, their most important gain, in my estimation, was the newly developed confidence they felt with standard English. When these same students enrolled in a conventional writing course, their attitude, in some cases, changed to the extent that they simply did not feel they could write. Their confidence quickly disappeared as the class focus changed from building on their language abilities to dwelling on their obvious language deficiencies.

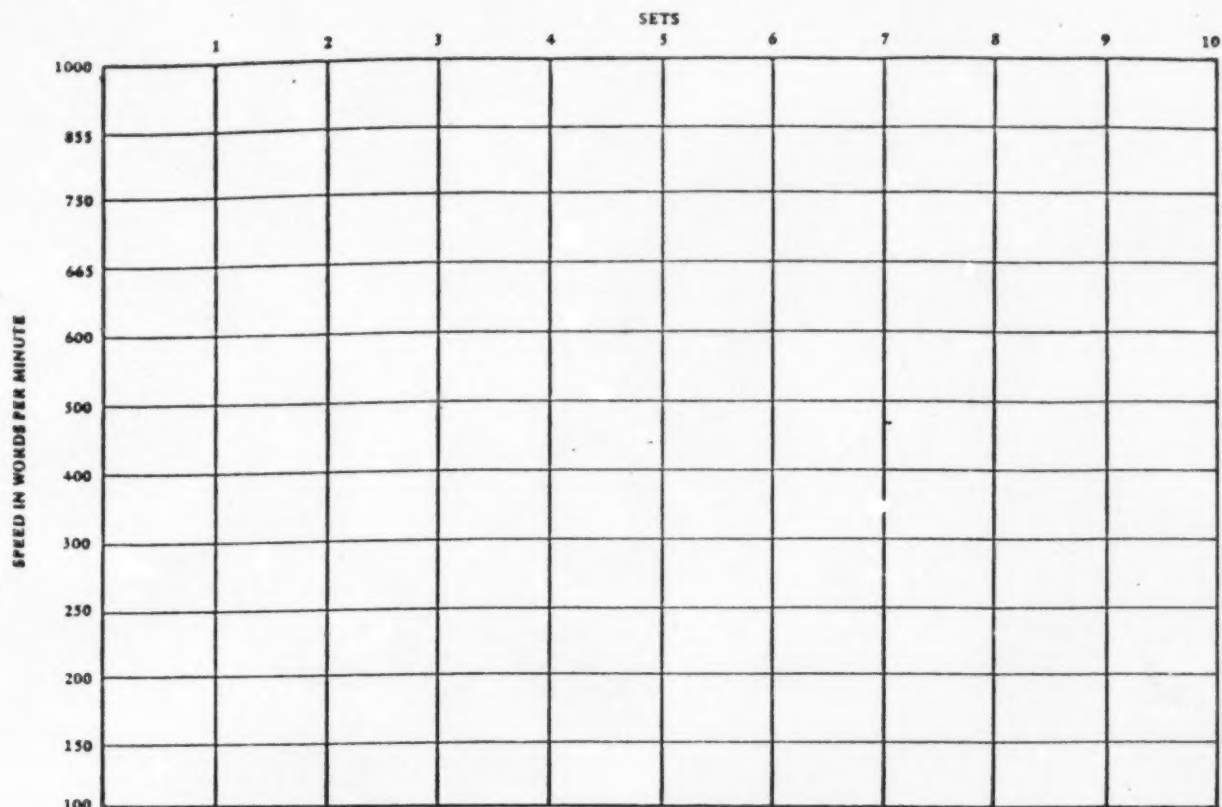
Educationally disadvantaged students benefit from a class which takes advantage of the skills already mastered and which aids the students in acquiring those skills they lack. Their better developed communication skills, given proper attention, will enable us to succeed as teachers of writing for these important but often neglected groups of students.



PROGRESSIVE DIFFICULTY OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

Figure 1.

RATE GRAPH



DIAGNOSTIC CHART

READING PASSAGE: 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50	
1. SUBJECT MATTER	
2. MAIN IDEAS	
3. SUPPORTING DETAILS	
4. CONCLUSIONS	
5. CLARIFYING DEVICES	
6. VOCABULARY	

GRAPHING YOUR PROGRESS

6 CORRECT - 100%	26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50
5 CORRECT - 83%	
4 CORRECT - 67%	
3 CORRECT - 50%	
2 CORRECT - 33%	
1 CORRECT - 17%	

Figure 2.

ORAL COMPETENCY EVALUATION

NAME :

TOPIC _____

DATE :

ORGANIZATION OF IDEAS:

DICTION:

1. QUALITY OF VOICE:

2. CHOICE OF VOCABULARY:

ORAL COUNTENANCE:

CONTRIBUTION TO THE SUCCESS OF DISCUSSION:

CLASS BOOK LIST

- Elin, Rhoderick. Pathways to Speech. New York, 1973.
- Fry, Edward. Reading Drills. Providence, Rhode Island, 1975.
- Gilbert, Marilyn. Clear Writing. New York, 1972.
- Jacobus, Lee. Improving College Reading. New York, 1972.
- _____. The Paragraph and Essay Book. New York, 1977.
- Pauk, Walter. Six-Way Paragraphs. Providence, Rhode Island, 1974.
- Ross, Janet. Writing English. New York, 1975.
- Willis, Hulon. Grammar and Composition. New York, 1976.